

IDAHO VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES

July 12, 2007

Pursuant to agreement, a meeting of the Idaho Veterans Affairs Commission was held in the conference room at the Idaho State Veterans Home – Pocatello, Thursday, July 12, 2007, for the purpose of reviewing program reports and other items of business.

Present: Commissioner, Donald Riegel, Chairman
Commissioner, Ken Pitcher, Vice Chairman
Commissioner Frank Richardson
Commissioner Zachary Rodriguez
Commissioner Barbara Thurlow
David Brasuell, Administrator, IDVS
Susan Lowman-Thomas, Human Resource Officer, IDVS
Debbie Spence, Financial Specialist Principal, IDVS
Jim Adams, Administrative Support Manager, IDVS
James Roberts, Administrator, IDVH – Boise
Clark Graebel, Administrator, IDVH – Lewiston
Tom Ressler, Office of Veterans Advocacy
Rich Cesler, Director, Veterans Cemetery
Tammy Hebdon, Administrative Assistant 2, IDVS

Chairman Don Riegel called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m.

INTRODUCTION OF GUEST:

Wayne Mitchell, Commander, American Legion
Rick Helsley, Adjutant, American Legion
Donita Christensen came in and sang Happy Birthday to all the Birthday guys

APPROVAL OF THE APRIL 2007 IDAHO VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES:

Commissioner Zach Rodriguez moved that the Commission dispense with the reading of the April 2007 minutes and approve them as written. Commissioner Frank Richardson seconded the motion; motion carried.

IDAHO DIVISION OF VETERANS SERVICES HUMAN RESOURCES:

Susan Lowman-Thomas provided the Commission with an update on the various issues affecting human resources within the Division. Turnover is still an issue in all areas of the Division, but overall continues to be at or below the industry average. As discussed at the April 2007 Commission meeting, motivational meetings and conference calls have been implemented, allowing all of the homes to discuss issues of concern and share ideas

about how to resolve those issues. These sessions have proven to be very useful in identifying areas of concern and paths to resolution, and will continue.

Public Information Officer – Patti Murphy, the new Public Information Officer, has been very busy over the past three months. Some of the assignments completed include press release announcing Echo Taps and Memorial Day events at the Idaho State Veterans Cemetery which resulted in extensive media coverage and attendance; working with both Dave Brasuell and the Idaho Statesman for a Reader's View that ran on May 19th; drafting news releases on the Show & Shine fund raiser at the Eagle Fun Days; editing and reworking news releases on Preserving the Legacy at the Idaho State Veterans Home and League Bowlers Donate to Idaho State Veterans Home. In addition, Patti has begun developing a plan to create new contents for the website. Once the plan is completed the next step will be to hire an independent contractor to develop the website.

Human Resource Changes – as reported last Commission meeting, the Division of Human Resources has begun merging with the Division of Financial Management, resulting in many of the DHR functions coming to the individual State agency level. The work load shift is being handled by the IDVS human resource employees, assuring all of these changes are absorbed with the least amount of interruption, and the process seems to be working well.

New Employees – As a result of all the changes taking place, Division has begun the process of hiring three new employees: one IT, one financial and one human resource. These positions should all be filled by the next Commission meeting.

Employment Eligibility Verification System – Governor Otter has mandated that all state agencies begin using the federal system designed to verify the eligibility of employees to work in the United States. In response to that mandate, Susan Lowman-Thomas and Tammy Hebdon will be the designated "corporate" level administrators and each of the homes will have a person assigned to verify new hires. This verification system accesses both Social Security Administration and Bureau of Homeland Security databases to verify eligibility to work, and provides instantaneous reporting which allows the hiring entity to know immediately if the potential employee is authorized to work. Use of this system will greatly reduce the number of unauthorized employees hired within the State of Idaho.

With the entire responsibility shift from the Division of Human Resources to individual agencies, Commissioner Richardson wanted to know who would be doing criminal background checks. Susan Lowman-Thomas responded that we have been doing it using the H&W pilot program, but that program ends in September. Most likely, we will go back to the State Police system, which does not provide as comprehensive of a background check. Commissioner Thurlow wondered if there were any other options available. Susan Lowman-Thomas said that she was not aware of any, but that she would investigate further and see what other alternatives there might be, but warned that part of the problem with some of the systems is the cost. Susan Lowman-Thomas advised the

Commission that constant checks for sex offenders and other violent offenders are performed. Clark Graebel wanted to know if there was any significant difference between the H&W program and the State Police programs. Susan reiterated that the H&W program appeared to be a more comprehensive background check, and that the State Police program doesn't appear to be that extensive. Brent Schneider commented that the problem right now is that IHC is waiting for H&W to better define the guidelines, so until that happens, there is some confusion as to exactly what needs to be done.

Commissioner Richardson commented that we shouldn't be as concerned with the increased cost in obtaining background checks, but instead should really concentrate on the cost of the liability if someone were to fall through the cracks. He believed it would be better to pay a higher fee to get a more extensive background check, then to take the chance with the \$15 State Police check.

Commissioner Rodriguez asked if the idea about addressing high turnover within the C.N.A. field and retention were discussed or if they had just gone by the wayside? Susan Lowman-Thomas said that the issue had not been dropped and asked James Roberts, Boise Home Administrator to address the topic. James reported that the Boise home has begun using their High Performance Organization to help recognize the work being done by the C.N.A.'s. This Organization is comprised of management staff members who use fun activities to encourage the C.N.A's to participate and receive rewards. One of the activities they held was a Deal or No Deal game where each employee's name was put into a drawing and when they were drawn they were given a suitcase cutout with a prize on the back of it and they were given the option of Deal or No Deal so they could keep the prize they had or they could trade it in for a second option (unknown prize). This activity was well received and resulted in lots of fun items being given to the employees. In addition, department heads have been given a stack of Canteen bucks that they will hand out to employees as they see them doing a good job; immediate recognition. Commissioner Rodriguez wanted to know if fellow employees were allowed to go to managers and report "good deeds" they had observed? James responded that yes, and that these reports often resulted in HUGS being read out loud at staff meetings and the recipient receiving \$5.00; employee of the quarter gets recognized at the All Staff meeting and receives a certificate of recognition and \$100. Additionally, the Boise Home now has a Wall of Leadership where pictures of all members of the leadership team are posted so everyone can see them and know who is who and who they can go to for assistance. Susan Lowman-Thomas added that HR and management are working with managers who appear to have high turnover, helping to identify causes and find solutions.

Commissioner Ken Pitcher commented that it speaks highly for our organization that we have many employees in the Pocatello and Lewiston homes that have been on board since the homes opened.

IDAHO DIVISION OF VETERANS SERVICES FINANCIAL REPORT:

Debbie Spence updated the Commission on the status of the FY07 budget at the end of the Fiscal Year: total expenditures were \$19,681,500 and total appropriations were \$21,505,100. Additionally, there is \$321,975.50 left in the Cemetery Grant Fund, which will be used to cover the new Visitors Center at the Idaho State Veterans Cemetery and any other outstanding capital outlay expenditures.

Currently the Division Fiscal section is working on the year end closing packet. The process of collecting all the information and getting it to the State Controllers Office will take approximately two months.

Additionally, the Legislative Services Office Audit is taking place. The auditor is located in the Division offices and is examining FY05, FY06, and FY07 Internal Controls, Expenditures, Revenue and VA Per Diem Program. One of the focus points of this audit is Internal Controls for all aspects of the business we conduct, not just the fiscal duties.

Our FY08 Appropriation totals \$33,518,100, comprised of \$5,313,489 in Receipts (15.85%), \$1,720,900 in General Funds (5.13%), \$430,400 in Endowment (1.258%), \$9,209,711 in Medicaid Receipts (27.48%) and \$16,843,600 in VA Federal Funds (50.26%), and \$10.5 million for the proposed North Idaho Veterans Cemetery. We will be requesting a FY08 supplemental to cover the costs of the Medicare startup.

In preparation for the FY09 Budget we will be reviewing our needs for personnel, operating and capital outlay, as well as revenue projections.

Commissioner Riegel questioned the impact Medicare will have on revenue. Debbie Spence and James Roberts explained that one of the biggest benefits will come in the form of convalescing veterans. Currently, without Medicare, veterans who are hospitalized for three or more days must go from the hospital to another facility that takes Medicare, recover there and then return to the veterans home. With the Medicare program, these veterans will be able to immediately come back to the Veterans Home and continue their recovery, with the cost being covered by Medicare. As this will be based on bed availability; it may not always be available, but it will provide an option that is not available currently.

Commissioner Rodriguez wanted to know how many Medicare applicants are being turned away now. Brent Schneider and James Roberts both answered that it is hard to say because there is no knowledge as to which hospitalized veterans currently have Medicare. Dave Brasuell noted that in the State of Idaho there are 80 skilled nursing facilities, and only three of them do not accept Medicare – the three State Veterans Homes. Dave also reported that a letter has gone out to all Idaho hospitals letting them know that our Homes are in the process of becoming Medicare approved and that we will let them know when that takes affect and we are able to accept patients. Commissioner Riegel wanted to know how a veteran who does not have Medicare can get that coverage. Jim Adams responded that the veteran would have to work with his/her social worker and file the necessary application.

QUESTION/ANSWER PERIOD ON THE VETERANS HOMES, THE OFFICE OF VETERANS ADVOCACY AND THE STATE VETERANS CEMETERY FY05 THIRD QUARTER OPERATIONS REPORTS:

Pocatello Veterans Home Operations Report:

Pocatello Home Administrator Brent Schneider reported that the Pocatello home continues to collect their receipts and that all money due to date has been collected. Census is still an on-going struggle, with the average at about 56/57. The pattern appears to be that as one or two are admitted, the home loses one or two. Brent informed the Commission that both he and Carey Hebdon (the activities director) have undertaken several projects in hopes of turning this trend around. Currently there are television commercials running, they are attending Rotary Club (and other civic organizations) meetings, veterans events, military organizations meetings and health fairs. Brent also believes that the upcoming inception of Medicare will have a very positive effect on the Pocatello Home census.

Pharmacy costs at the Pocatello Home a year ago were \$12/ppd; today they are at \$8/ppd. Although this is an improvement, Brent feels it could still be better. To help achieve that goal, Brent recently met with the pharmacist from the VA and asked for their help in identifying procedure changes that would help decrease the PPD cost. The current pharmacy contract is set to expire the end of August 2007, and there is expectation that the new contract will assist in lowering this cost.

Overall the Pocatello Home is doing well. The food service cost is running between \$6.30-\$7.00. The energy costs are good, and plans are to begin replacing all of the lights with T8 energy efficient lighting—this is an expense that Idaho Power will partially reimburse for. Laundry & Housekeeping is going well and the Pocatello Home is very happy with the services they are receiving. This contract is in the process of being renewed. Plans are in place to replace the current nursing call system with a wireless system and to replace the carpet in the east and west halls.

The new garage is going up, and everyone is very excited about this. As a result of being exposed to the elements, the Pocatello Homes cars have suffered tremendous wear and tear, and the garage will be a welcome addition.

The Pocatello home has a wonderful volunteer pool, thanks in part to the wonderful work of Carey Hebdon. Carey has developed a network of resources that she can call on at any time. On the average there is one volunteer hours/ppd.

Activities during the past quarter include a visit from the Easter bunny with approximately 50 community kids in attendance; Volunteer Appreciation Luncheon where 100 volunteers were recognized with certificates, Memorial Day Program from a Firth High School teacher (who is also a veteran) who gave a synopsis on veterans he has been researching along with a poem about veterans that was recited by one of his

students. In June the home embarked on three fishing trips –Twin Falls area, Pocatello area and Idaho Falls. These outings are trips that the residents look forward to and talk about for months leading up to them. During the 4th of July holiday, Brent and Commissioner Rodriguez participated in a dunking tank fund raiser sponsored by the Idaho Falls Chamber of Commerce. The money raised from this event will be donated to the Fisher House Foundation, a private organization that has homes for those in VAMC to use while in the hospital, and they have plans to build some homes in the Idaho Falls area. This was a worthwhile event, and one that Brent and Zach Rodriguez were honored to participate in.

In the area of nursing services, the Pocatello Home strives to keep ppd hours at 3.5, and the current actual is 3.47. Thanks to the diligence in scheduling that Donita Christensen exercises, Pocatello continues to be below budget. During the months of May and June, the Pocatello Home had NO AGENCY HOURS!!! The hiring of a couple of part-time/temp RNs during the summer vacation time was instrumental in achieving this goal.

We are proud to welcome Alison Magagna to the Pocatello Home Social Services Department. Alison comes from Health and Welfare-Child Protection, and brings with her a wealth of knowledge and experience.

Commissioner Thurlow referenced the notation on the quarterly report concerning a “disciplinary action and ADT for a staff member who reported to work impaired” and wanted to know if this was still ongoing. Brent Schneider informed the Commission that yes, this is still on-going but is being handled, that it involved one of the nurses, but that no patients are at risk.

Commissioner Thurlow wanted to know if anyone was noticing an increase in applicants as a result of all those being displaced by the HR change. Debbie Spence reported that when a register comes to us it indicates if the applicant is transferring, but that no special treatment is given to those applicants.

Commissioner Pitcher wanted to know if the Pocatello Home was just Medicare certifying one wing, or the entire facility. Brent Schneider assured the Commission that the entire facility was being certified.

On that same subject, Commissioner Rodriguez questioned what was being done in the area of training to cover the Medicare changes? Dave Brasuell assured everyone that there has been a plan in place for some time to assure that everyone involved in Medicare is trained, including the Admission Coordinators. Medicare does require more attention to detail, so training will be imperative to assure that all staff members are up to speed before the implementation. Training is an on-going concern and will continue. Debbie Spence and Debra Burt (Boise Home) will be going back east for training in Ultra Care. In April the Division provided updated Ultra Care training, which was attended by employees from all three homes. The training was well received and is being used.

Commissioner Pitcher wanted to know when Medicare certification was expected. James Roberts explained that the process has been going for about three months, but it is a very cumbersome tedious process. One of the major issues has been that our National Provider Numbers and Tax ID Numbers do not match, which is a legal issue, but we have to resolve this before the ball can continue to roll. The worst case scenario is that we may have to go back and re-enroll for another National Provider Number so that it can match the Tax ID number. This is not difficult, but it is time consuming. Brent Schneider added that there have been several other issues, but they have all been easily resolved, and all is going well now. The only other possible hold up may be the 504ADA assessment. This has not yet been requested, but it may in the future. However, since we are a state agency, it may be assumed that we are already in compliance and this may never be requested.

In May the Pocatello Home received a new sound system and Commissioner Rodriguez wanted to know how it was working. Brent was pleased to report that it was working great and that the surround sound speakers have made it much easier for all of the residents to hear what is being said.

Lewiston Veterans Home Operations Report:

The Lewiston Veterans Home, under direction of Clark Graebel, was proud to report that their occupancy rate this past quarter was at 90%. They have experienced several admissions, but unfortunately have also had several deaths. Clark informed the Commission that he has discovered that many of the “active” wives (those who are able to interact in activities, etc.) who have been residents at the Lewiston Home and have discharged back to their husbands appear to experience a fairly quick deterioration in health. Clark isn’t sure why this happens, and he will continue to monitor this and see if the trend continues.

The pharmacy costs at the Lewiston Home are doing well. There have been some issues with collecting pharmacy dollars, and it is expected that the \$6600 reported for the month of June may actually come in closer to \$9700. Recently the Lewiston Home has implemented a tighter pharmacy program, which should continue to help reduce the pharmacy costs.

Over the past quarter a Food Service Survey was conducted. The findings from this survey included: the majority of residents like breakfast the best; 63% rated the quality of food good to excellent; the favorite meal was chicken, potatoes & gravy, ice cream; the most disliked item was cooked vegetables. This survey is very useful in meal planning.

The Laundry/Janitorial service is doing fine. This contract is up for renewal, and the Request For Proposal (RFP) for these services has gone out and is in the process of

evaluation. Hopefully the awarding of this contract will take place in the next couple weeks.

The construction of the Physical Therapy/Activity Room is moving very SLOWLY. The project is four months into the six month project and the footings have still not been poured. Inquiries as to why this is happening have resulted in a series of excuses from the contractor and subcontractors. Due to limited number of contractors in the Lewiston area, and the spreading too thin of the resources available, very few hours are being spent on this project. Dave Brasuell wanted to know if we needed to contact Division of Public Works (Elaine) and have her look into this issue. Clark reported that she has been up to investigate but nothing has happened. The contractor has until October to finish this project, but it is very unlikely that deadline will be met.

Last year, with the change in maintenance staff, a number of issues dealing with Boilers and Water systems were identified. At that time, we were warned about potential problems with the hot water tank, but were assured that there were no real problems (leaks, lack of water, etc.). However, this year we have noticed unclear water and other issues, so a plumber came to check things out. What he found was the hot water tank is an old epoxy lined tank, built 14 years ago, with several fractures in the lining and many stalactites' in the inside hanging and broken off resulting in a break in the integrity of the tank. Because of these issues, the tank needed to be replaced before it ruptured. New tanks are glass lined, and cost \$13,000 to replace. This expense was met with FY07 funds. However, there will be an additional cost of \$18,500 to install the tank, the amount provided by the one and only bidder. The high cost to install the tank is a direct result of the difficulty that will be met when removing the old tank. This is an expense that may have been avoided had the past maintenance person done routine checks on the system, highlighting the need to keep up with routine maintenance inspections.

Commissioner Thurlow wanted to know if any other alternative had been explored, such as instantaneous water systems. Clark assured her that they had looked at other systems, but none of them were able to meet the demands of the Lewiston Home. Commissioner Thurlow asked, since storage tanks are going by the wayside, what other people in the nursing home/assisted living industry are doing? Clark replied that he wasn't sure what they were using, but did indicate that most nursing home facilities were using the same systems as many hotels.

Brent Schneider commented that as a result of this issue in Lewiston, the Pocatello Home's maintenance staff has been routinely checking their system, and he will continue to do so. Dave Brasuell noted that it may be time to include the replacement of the Pocatello Home's system in the DPW submission. At the same time, Dave suggested that we need to explore what other options are available and eventually replace the current boiler systems with a better, cheaper to maintain system. He and Jim Adams will work on this project and get back with what they find out. Again, this situation reiterates the importance of a good, on-going maintenance program!

Commissioner Rodriguez cautioned that sometimes when issues concerning construction projects are aired, corners begin to get cut. He suggested that a sharp eye be kept on the contractor to assure that doesn't happen. Jim Adams commented that he will meet with Elaine at DPW and let her know of the concerns.

Boise Veterans Home Operations Report:

James Roberts reported that the Boise Home has been very busy getting ready for Medicare and the transition into the new therapy and pharmacy contracts.

The Boise Home has been utilizing the knowledge of Marta Evans to help clean up some of the billing issues and old accounts. Her results have been very positive and the Boise Home is beginning to see the results. Collection of receipts is going well, and census has been holding steady, with occupancy rate at 96%.

The on-going problem of receiving pharmacy payments from HUMANA is still not resolved. The Boise Home staff worked with Jessica (Pocatello Home) prior to her leaving, and did rebill, but so far nothing has been collected. Several attempts have been made to resolve the issue by phone, but the result has been "passed along" from one person to another, with no resolution. Consequently, the entire matter has been turned over to Julie Weaver, our Attorney General. She is planning to review the documentation and then send a letter to HUMANA concerning payment. There are 14 residents who currently have HUMANA coverage, and they may need to change to a different provider if there is not a positive resolution to this issue. Clark Graebel indicated that the Lewiston Home had a similar problem, and they submitted a new contract and haven't had any problems since. James acknowledged that the Boise Home has a current contract with HUMANA, but that he would keep that in mind in case this doesn't get resolved. On a positive note, the VA pharmacy payments are finally coming in. The low pharmacy cost reported is due to \$45,000 credit that is a result of using the formulary and returns. The Boise pharmacist does a great job of keeping a sharp eye on drugs and costs, and returning items no longer needed, which results in the continued credits. The Boise Home pharmacy contract came up again, and was put out to bid. The only pharmacy willing to bid was the one we currently have and he came in with a flat fee rate, as well as a variable rate of \$11.00/prescription filled. The contract has been signed and is good for 5 years.

The Physical Therapy contract has been a bit tougher. Five bids were received, they were narrowed down to two and one was picked based on cost. However, the other company appealed, so a review had to take place. We are now ready to award the new contract and terminate the current provider. The new provider is Functional Pathways, from Knoxville TN.

The Housekeeping\Laundry contract is also up for renewal. A-OK has had this contract for several years; however, we had several other companies participate in the walk through, so we'll see how it comes out.

Food costs for the month of May were a bit higher than normal, but they are still on target. Energy costs are lower this quarter as a result of two major credits from Bonneville Power.

The Nursing hours at 2.9 are a bit suspect, so James said he would double check them and get updated numbers with the June information. The use of Agency still has not come down much. The use of agency hours to cover nurses has improved. Unfortunately C.N.A. usage continues to be a problem, partly due to the fact that the quality of C.N.A.'s being provided is not up to standards. Staff has been instructed to assure correct protocol is being followed when deciding to use Agency hours.

In an attempt to lower Agency hours, the Boise Home has begun using BoiseJobs.com instead of the local newspaper to announce job openings. The cost for this service is \$600/year, with no limit on the number of job announcements placed. The quality of applicants seems to have improved with this service.

There are several projects in process at the Boise Home. The replacement of the Service Elevator is still moving forward. Currently the contractor is waiting for the actual elevator to arrive. Once it is here it will be installed. The bid on the Maintenance Shop opened two days ago and came in way below what was anticipated, and was also very competitive—only \$96 difference in bids.

The annual Twin Falls fishing trip was very successful again this year. Unfortunately James was unable to attend, but he does plan to participate in next year's trip. The other big hit this summer has been the trips to the horse races.

Idaho State Veterans Cemetery Report:

Rich Cesler reported that to date there have been 1130 total internments (spouses and children included). On the average, there are more than 40 internments per month, which is an increase of 10.

There have been many extra activities taking place at the Cemetery this past quarter. This has resulted in some overtime hours, but that should decrease. Anytime an employee is asked to work overtime, they are then given a three day weekend. This seems to be an acceptable solution for the employees, and allows the Cemetery to meet all of their commitments.

The Visitors Center project is progressing. The footings and concrete have been poured and the framing is completed, so it appears that it should be done on time. The contractor has been working weekends, Fridays and Mondays to help alleviate conflicts, and they check in daily to assure no conflict.

Thanks to an Eagle Scout and his Eagle Scouts Project the cemetery now has new turf in the area by the Scatter Garden, including a sprinkler system. As a result of the hard

work, this was all done before Memorial Day. In addition, the scout's dad owns a printing company, and he printed all of the Memorial Day programs, saving the Cemetery about \$250.00. A second Eagle Scout purchased about 50 more flag poles and a third Eagle Scout installed them. With the help of these Eagle Scouts, many "much needed" items are being taken care of.

An additional donation came from Concrete Specialties, who installed a 6ft walkway around the committal shelter retaining wall. And, Curtis Clean Sweep donated re-painting of parking lines and road lines and angle parking lines, which increased the available parking from six spaces to 49.

Each company who donates services to the Cemetery receives a plaque and letter thanking them and the Eagle Scouts each receive a letter telling them how the cemetery benefited from their donations. To date, donations have saved cemetery about \$9000.00

Plans for a second cemetery continue, but have expanded to include the possibility of a location in Eastern Idaho. To this point, all of the efforts have been focused towards the North, and that will continue, but due to the fact that there has not been any property identified this path has hit a standstill. Commissioner Riegel has taken this project under his wing and he is working to help find the land needed and make this a reality.

In the meantime, efforts have begun in the Eastern Idaho area. Currently there is a search for land in this area. Rich Cesler is working with the community and civil leaders, getting all of them involved first, and then will begin working on securing the grant money. Rich reports that those in power in Washington, D.C. have "suggested" that we turn our focus this direction, as there is no other competition in this area.

Commissioner Richardson wanted to know if anyone has tried to contact Mr. Hagadone about property in the Coeur d'Alene area? He is the biggest philanthropist in that area, and has donated to a lot of causes in the past, so he would probably be a good place to go. Rich answered that he had been considered, but that in order to speak with Mr. Hagadone you need to have a really good contact that will help you get in the door. Rich added that Sen. Craig said if someone can get us in the door then he would endorse the visit, but due to political appearance he would not be able to be the contact. Commissioner Richardson wanted to know why the Commission couldn't endorse the visit. Rich indicated that would be fine, but they needed to do so through the correct avenues and include Dave Brasuell, Jim Adams and himself.

Commissioner Riegel informed the Commission that the problem in North Idaho is finding the land. Inquires have been made to the state, the federal government and to private land owners. Any federal land we find will have at least a three year wait before we can "own" it; the federal government is not willing to let go of the tree farm; the BLM has 40 acres we could probably have, but the access road is dirt and the cost to pave it is \$70,000 per mile. As for private land, there was a potential, but it turns out the county now owns it and they are not willing to let it go. So, the hunt continues.

Rich Cesler also reported that Sen. Craig has made some anticipated changes to the death benefits. Currently, two years after a veteran dies, the plot allowance is lost. Sen. Craig is proposing that the time limit be alleviated—that there not be any time constraint. His second proposal is to increase the plot allowance, but the amount is unsure at this time. The last proposal is for a \$5 million increase in the Grant program, which states could use for maintenance and operations. Rich said he suggested they use this funding to provide more pre-set vaults to each state cemetery, which would allow them to help five states a year.

The Second Annual Missing in America Ceremony is scheduled for November 9, 2007, at the Idaho State Veterans Cemetery. Currently there are 15 cremains to be interred, but Rich anticipates having more by the time of the ceremony. Recently Rich attended the Western Regional Convention of Idaho Funeral Home Associations and provided each participant with information about the Missing in America Project and how they can contact the Cemetery to transfer any cremains they may receive.

Update on Events Held:

Memorial Day Ceremony – once again this year this ceremony was well received and attended. It is estimated that over 3000 were in attendance. It was a beautiful day and the Ceremony went off without any problems.

The **Echo Taps** Event was a big hit and will now be an annual event.

The **Field of Heros/Flags** was also well received, and the Echo Taps provided a bugeler to play Taps at this ceremony as well.

The **Savvy Shopper** campaign resulted in 10 bricks being sold and the Garage Sale they held resulted in a \$500 donation to the indigent fund.

The **Show and Shine** at Eagle Fun Days - donation jugs have been placed throughout the Valley, and it is estimated that 30% of collections (\$1000-\$2000) will be donated to the indigent fund.

The **Lions Clubs** sold bricks totaling \$2500 and have also donated \$1000 to the indigent fund

Garrison Flags are used at the Cemetery, and due to weather wear and tear, we go through five or six of them a year. These flags cost \$460.00 each. A local Mom who has a son in Iraq has found three corporate donors who have pledged to donate 5 flags each per year.

As a result of their hard work and dedication to the Cemetery, the Landscape Crew has reduced their expenses, resulting in a savings. This savings is being used to send the Landscape Assistant to training, which will result in even more cost savings. Last year Darin Sorenson was sent to this training, and when he returned he made a change in fertilizer, resulting in a savings of over \$2000/year. Obviously the training is well worth the money spent.

Unfortunately, Kareece Bull, the Administrative Assistant II, has left to take a job in the private sector. We have promoted Neta into that position and have hired Sherry Bawaulda to cover the front desk. The changes seem to be working well and are being well received by the staff, volunteers and clients. Plans are to continue enhancing this

system, thus making it easier for Rich Cesler to carry out business away from the Cemetery.

In the past there have been times when there has been some confusion as to which member of a family is to receive the flag. In order to alleviate this problem, and make it easier to identify who gets flags, Rich had Bucks Bags make “Flag Recipient” covers for the chair and the recipient is asked to sit in that chair. This change has allowed the flag bearer to quickly identify the recipient and place the flag in his/her hands, without having to go from person to person before reaching the correct person.

FYI—The Application for Presidential Certificate form is now a part of the family packet.

Rich Cesler informed the Commission of the Cemetery Goals for the next year:

- 1—once the Visitors Center is done, close the existing grant
- 2—secure funding for second cemetery
- 3—provide whatever staff training the budget will allow
- 4—improve security system to help monitor the entire grounds

Commissioner Richardson asked if Rich knew how much of the indigent funds had been used to date to intern veterans? Rich reported that all of the original 21 Missing in America internments, as well as two additional have been funded out of the Indigent Fund. The Indigent Fund has in excess of \$30,000 at this point. Commissioner Richardson followed up wanting to know if, as more cremains that have exceeded the two year limit are identified and placed, the Indigent Fund will absorb the \$300 to place them. Rich affirmed that and added that the proposal by Sen. Craig to remove the two year limit is going to be retroactive, and if that happens and the funds are collected they will be disbursed back to the Indigent Fund to replace the money that was originally used to intern the veterans.

Jim Adams informed the Commission that the Governor and First Lady of Idaho announced they will be purchasing a brick for each Idaho soldier Killed In Action (KIA) during their “watch”.

Office of Veterans Advocacy Operations Report:

Tom Ressler reported that the Boise office has been very busy this last quarter. The Board of Veterans Appeals conducted traveling and video appeals during the quarter, which resulted in an increase in hearing numbers. Currently, any claim that is on appeal is taking 2 – 2.5 years before the claimant hears back.

The Emergency Grants program has been well used this past year. Tom reports that at the end of this year there was \$4000 left in the program, confirming the decision to increase the Grant Program budget to \$30,000. The Boise area depleted their allotment

prior to the end of the term, while Pocatello and Lewiston still had funds available. Tom informed the Commission that there has been some discussion about moving the date when the balance becomes available for use by anyone meeting the criteria to February 1st. This change would allow all three areas to get through the holidays and then be able to help those still in need sooner.

Commissioner Pitcher moved that the date the balance in the Emergency Grant program becomes available to all areas be changed to February 1st. Commissioner Rodriguez seconded the motion, and the motion passed unanimously.

During the April Commission meeting Commissioner Rodriguez wanted to know what the OEF/OIF numbers looked like. In response to that, Tom reported that from January 2007 to today, there have been 238 claims filed; 72 were filed by the Boise Office, with the others being filed by the DAV or by the claimant themselves. Additionally, some of these claims are actually filed before the veteran leaves the hospital.

Publicity, and how the word is getting out to our veterans, was another question asked at the April Commission meeting. In response Tom informed the Commission that several avenues are being used. The Service Officers are taking advantage of all opportunities to go out and talk about what they do and what services the OVA can provide, each of the State Conventions programs will have a full page ad detailing who they are, where they are located and who to contact, and Patti Murphy is working on advertising in places like movie theaters, etc.

As of June 20, 2007, veterans are now able to hire their own lawyer when they receive their first Notice of Decision. OVA will not be responding to any of these lawyers, and has put the word out to call the VA Regional Office at 1-800-827-1000 and ask for Eden Kruger, the Attorney Fee Coordinator. As of last week, there have not been any calls, and the Boise Office does not anticipate there will be many in this area.

Tom passed along information concerning the Military Order of the Purple Heart Job Training Program. This is a program that is available to any veteran, and they do not have to be a Purple Heart recipient, and provides computer training. This is a wonderful program for those who are housebound, and appears to be very successful. Commissioner Rodriguez commented that he has referred 17 people to this program and it has been very successful.

The yearly Officers Training School is coming up in August. Tom informed the Commission that the letters have been sent out to the counties and have been well received. For the first time in a long time, Clark County and Custer County will be sending representatives. The School will be held in Boise, at the DoubleTree Hotel again this year.

Tom updated the Commission on a recent employee move. Steve Teague has moved from the Boise Veterans Home to the Regional Office and Gina Stamper has gone to the Boise Home. Tom also let the Commission members know that Gina is the Idaho

representative for the Women Veterans Coordinator. In this capacity, Gina recently attended a meeting in Oregon, where next years convention will be held. Gina is in the process of raising funds so that the Idaho contingency can pay for one of the lunches and would appreciate any assistance in doing so. Additionally, Gina is actively pursuing having the conference in Boise in 2009.

Some “Nice to Know” Facts:

The VA is using a census that says Idaho has 136,584 veterans.

The State of Idaho is bringing in \$13.8 million in comp & pensions to veterans

According to the 2005 census, Idaho is the 4th fastest growing state in the nation.

Due to the continued growth, the VA has begun hiring more people and is in the process of placing seven new staff members.

Commissioner Pitcher asked for an update on the building for the new regional office. Tom informed him that “it’s a myth”. The ground breaking was supposed to have already taken place, but that got put on hold when it was discovered that there was more money available, which could lead to a bigger building. As of now, plans are to put the building out for bids in November/December, and to hopefully break ground the first of year. The building will initially be a one story building, with the possibility of adding a second floor at a later date. An additional problem has arisen because the Army will not share the parking lot.

In response to the new rule about veterans hiring their own attorney, Commissioner Rodriguez wanted to know if there was anything in place to protect veterans from lawyers not authorized. Tom assured him that yes, all lawyers representing veterans are required to file a report with the VA telling them what they are asking for and the VA will review this plan and decide if it’s a conceivable plan or not. If not, it will be rejected and the lawyer will not be allowed to proceed.

Idaho State Division of Veterans Services Report:

Dave began his review of the past quarter by informing the Commission that he has been attending Governor Otter’s cabinet meetings, which have all been very interesting and informative. The meetings will be held monthly, taking the month of July off, and Dave assured the Commission that he will continue to attend.

It appears as if the Division is almost fully staffed. This includes OVA, the Boise Home Business Office, and the other Homes. This is very important as we begin the transformation into Medicare, as it allows us to have staff that is fully trained and ready to roll.

Dave has deemed this year the “Year of the Contract”. It appears as though every contract is up for renewal. In an attempt to make this process easier and more consistent, Debbie and Julie Weaver (Attorney General) have been diligently working on a blank

template format for contracts. Once completed, this will be the format that everyone will be using for contracts.

Dave let the Commission know that the Division has received \$1.9 million in funding for Division of Public Works Projects for FY08. This is great news as we have around \$800,000 in backlog projects, so it is anticipated that the Division should be able to complete most, if not all, of those projects this fiscal year. The FY09 project list is due next week, so the Homes, OVA, the Cemetery and Division have all be asked to look around and to list any possible need and send that to Dave. It is anticipated that FY09 may produce the same type of funding as FY08, therefore it is important to include everything.

Recently the Services Officers took a test, and Dave reported that the highest score this past year IN THE NATION was achieved by Steve Teague!!!!!!! Congratulations!

There is a new VA Hospital Administrator, Dwayne Hamlin. Dave is planning to meet with him and share ideas. It is interesting to note that Dwayne is an engineer, showing that the VA is looking in different directions for hospital administrators.

Dave commented that with all of the changes taking place in State Government, there will be some challenges to face. The devolvement of DHR will result in Division being responsible for things it hasn't had in the past, which will definitely prove to be a challenge. Susan Lowman-Thomas is in the process of hiring an assistant who will help her assure that all rules and regulations are properly followed.

Plans are also in place to expand the IT section, and to move them out of the Division office and into their own space. The addition of new staff in the IT department will help divide the work and allow the IT personnel to resolve computer issues quicker.

As the fiscal year winds down, Dave will begin looking at the balance available in capital outlay and prioritizing the wants and needs of the Division. This process will allow for better spending of the funds available, as well as provide a better picture of what items still need addressed. Dave informed the Commission that some of the capital outlay money has been spent to purchase better lifts, med carts, beds for the three homes, chairs for Division staff and some much needed IT updates.

Dave informed the Commission that in the next few weeks Division will begin writing the specifications for the new CareTracker system, which will allow the RFP process to begin. Upon researching this system it was found that many other states are using it and it has been well received and highly recommended, so it appears that this will be a good product to have in use.

Dave has been approached by the University of Idaho Radio representative, who brought forth a radio advertising plan. With this plan, radio-style ads informing the public of who the Division of Veterans Services is and what they do, would run during all the UofI

football games. The Division Management Team suggested that Patti Murphy be involved in this and that she look at where this proposal fits in the big scheme of things.

Jim Adams apprised the Commission members of the proposed legislation Division is submitting this year. These proposals include:

1. box on state income tax form for donations to IDVS
2. 50% reduction in state income tax on military retirement
3. scratch game from lottery, geared towards a military theme, with a percentage coming to the division
4. certifications for military personnel with professional licenses, who are called to active duty, to be given 90 days extension upon return to just renew, not reapply, for their license

Jim also commented that, in the past, there have been many “frivolous” proposals submitted, which have never gone anywhere. Proposals need to be meaningful and purposeful, and also need to have strong support. It does not do any good to propose legislation if no one is going to follow it and lobby for support. Let’s make sure that our proposals are good ones, and ones that can be supported.

New Business:

There was no new business.

In closing, Commissioner Riegel thanked everyone for their participation, and commented that it was very nice to see more excitement and more details in the monthly reports. Thank you!

Next Meeting:

The next IVAC Meeting will be held October 4, 2007 at in Boise, at the Idaho State Veterans Home.

12:11 adjourned.